

THE NEARER BATTLE

By Howard Fielding. Copyright 1905, by Charles W. Hooks.

FORTIFIED against the day's unkindly promise by a melancholy breakfast, Kendall returned to the upper regions of the boarding house and resolutely sat down to write. There lay before him the first pages of a story. It had stopped like a cheap clock in the small hours of the morning, and he had abandoned it with a groan and had gone to bed. But the thing must be tinkered and put together and wound



she had merely stopped at his door up and sold. He scanned it in the cold light of day and was amazed to find some good in it, a clever bit of characterization, a touch of the picturesque, a dash of the odd, a glint of truth in a muddy mass of insincerity. There was even a pleasant jingle in the language, marred by dissonances, unmetrical and malicious, as if the very devil had joggled the author's elbow.

Kendall read and was affected with pity of himself and with a certain sympathy, a sorrowing tenderness, for the poor stuff that he had labored to produce, the misbegotten child of fallibilities.

A weak, uneven tapping at the door—a knock that was characteristic as handwriting and revealed a fixed habit of indecision—summoned Kendall to perform the sad rites of homeless hospitality. The aspect of his visitor was so clear in his imagination that he scarce saw her better after the door was open than before. She was a faded woman of forty-five in whose face there lurked an astonishing prettiness, illusive and inappropriate to her years, the ghost of girlhood.

He gave her welcome from an honest heart, but with a feigned good cheer. Would she come in? No; she was upon some errand and had merely stopped at his door. Nevertheless as he continued to stand waiting she entered and sat down.

"Edith has had breakfast," said she. "I brought up a cup of coffee and an orange. She seems to feel better this morning."

"There's nothing like a good square meal such as you mention," said he, smiling sadly, "to put a heart in one. May I go in by and by?"

"Yes; right away," she said, rising, while her eyes wandered to the writing table. "If it won't interrupt your work, Edith wants to see you."

He escorted her to the head of the stairs and then returned to his room, where he paced back and forth for some minutes, forcing himself to think cheerful and brave thoughts and striving to bring his countenance into accord with them. When this process had accomplished all that could be hoped of it in the light of his experience therewith he went out into the hall and saw a big, sturdy man ascending the stairs, which creaked loudly beneath him.

"Good morning, doctor," said Kendall. "May I ask if you are going to see Miss Cameron?"

"Yes, I was on another call in the house and met her mother, who suggested that I should go up."

"Will you look in upon me after you have seen her?" said Kendall, turning toward his room.

It may have been half an hour later when the doctor knocked and was admitted. Kendall eyed him with obvious, aching anxiety.

"Convalescence is a long business sometimes," said the doctor. "Miss Cameron had a serious illness, and there is a sense in which she has recovered from it, but a complete restoration to health may be a very tedious process."

"Do you see any improvement?" The doctor shook his head, and to the next question, "A loss, perhaps?" he answered with a guarded assent.

"I dread the winter," said Kendall. "If she could have a change of scene, if she could live an outdoor life in healthful surroundings—"

"I understand that there is a peculiar difficulty."

"They have a small property," rejoined Kendall, "but it is not yielding much income just now. I have looked into the matter at Mrs. Cameron's request. A year from now they will be somewhat easier in pocket. Meanwhile

they live here upon greatly reduced terms because of relationship. You doubtless know the situation."

"Mrs. Cameron explained it to me," said the doctor cautiously. "She mentioned an indebtedness which— I found it," he broke out. "If those people would stop worrying, the girl would be as well as I am in six months."

Kendall was very pale, and his face looked drawn and old.

"You are aware that I was engaged to Miss Cameron," said he. "In such circumstances at the time Miss Cameron's illness her mother, with great reluctance, permitted me to assist in meeting some demands. I was then in a fair way, but now—his voice suddenly became shrill and tremulous—"now I have gone all to pieces. I can scarcely make my living. And the knowledge of my altered condition is the last straw upon their backs. Miss Cameron has released me from the engagement prematurely. She will not bear of its continuance, believing her own case to be hopeless and herself a mere burden. So, even if I had the money, they would not take it. They would not let me save her life."

"Unless you had the strength to carry the matter with a high hand," responded the doctor. "And, speaking of your strength, I am not your medical adviser, but if you will grant me for a moment the greater privilege of advising you as a friend I shall suggest for you also a change of scene. I think you should not uselessly wreck your own career, of whose promise I have heard some very flattering things."

"I thank you," said Kendall coldly. And the doctor took his leave. Again Kendall paced back and forth and summoned up his courage with even less profit than before. Then he sat an hour with Edith and returned to his own room, his heart sore with love and heavy with discouragement.

And at about the same hour there were two men talking of this very matter. One of them was Kendall's age, though he looked younger. He spoke vigorously, smoked hard between whiffs and walked the floor with an air of zest in the exercise. The other was much older. His face was deeply lined and thoughtful. He sat by a broad, flat topped desk littered with manuscripts and letters and an odd assortment of reference books, big and little.

"You have chosen the flower of the flock," said the younger man. "Kendall is not only a natural born correspondent, with the gift of getting the truth and the much rarer gift of writing it, but he is the very man physically for this job. Heat and cold, rain and drought, good food, bad food and no food at all; swamps, microbes and bullets—I tell you Kendall eats them all and grows fat. The only thing that hurts him is a quiet life. I saw him in Cuba and in the Philippines, and he was always in condition, always bright and cheerful and enthusiastic. Besides, he has a smattering of Japanese—had a Jap classmate in college whom he was very fond of. I tell you, Graham, with these arrangements of yours and Kendall as your man you'll get the only good stuff that will have come from the east since the war began."

"There are two points," said Graham slowly. "We cannot afford to pay much; the expenses are so heavy. He'll come back no richer except in reputation. Second, I wish that he had kept himself more in the public eye of late. He has sunk completely out of sight."

"There's a reason for that, as I have told you," said the other, biting his cigar viciously. "But you can boom him up. The public remembers him."

"Well," Graham resumed after a pause, "I authorize you to lay this proposition before him. You are his closest friend, Stetson. You are the only man who without offense can show him the folly of his present course. Get him for me. I want him."

"Without offense?" echoed Stetson. "I don't know. But I'll do my duty. It isn't right that Ned Kendall should wreck his career for the sake of any woman, though she were the best in the world."

"Telegraph him to dine with you," suggested Graham. "Take him to Julian's, where the old crowd goes. Give him some raw meat and some good strong 'man talk,' as Kipling calls it. That will fetch him."

It was half past 6 when Kendall and Stetson met at Julian's. Kendall was weary with the day's ungrateful toil and gloomy thoughts; Stetson was alert and keen, with the eyes of a hunter. Fortune was kind; the right crowd was there, the atmosphere of the scene was perfect, and Kendall, with languid surprise, saw himself welcomed as if from a long illness or the very jaws of the grave. And in the exposition of the scheme Stetson surpassed all his own expectations.

"Jack," said Kendall at last, "I thank you from my soul. If this hour is the turning point of my life, as I truly believe, the credit is largely yours. You have awakened my manhood."

"Thank the Lord!" responded Stetson fervently.

"You have made an error, however," Kendall continued, "a natural error, which I will point out to you. We have seen so little of each other in the past year that you have lost track of me completely and now know nothing of my progress. I have advanced a great distance, but you have thought of me as standing still just where you left me. We all make such mistakes. We hold the pictures of our friends as we last saw them and forget that they must change."

"Do you mean that you've really got on with your work?"

Kendall shook his head.

"Very badly," said he. "My work in most respects has gone back. It is I that have advanced, and I really didn't know it myself until this evening. There is my debt to you. It is the way you have spoken of a man's life that has opened my eyes. Why, Jack, you've been talking of boys' games, the healthful amusements and exercises of youth, which fit us for the serious business of the world. Do you really fancy that following an army and living on horse meat and sleeping in six inches of dirty water in the bottom of an abandoned trench constitute a great achievement that is worth while in itself? My dear boy, I have outgrown such things. I have done them in the past, and they benefited me as much as football, perhaps a little more. It remains for me now that you have brought these early lessons back to my remembrance—to take the good of them and profit by the patience, strength and resourcefulness and courage that they taught me. I will begin tomorrow—no, tonight, for there are three good hours before 12."

"But—but aren't you going to take—Graham's offer?"

"I can't consider it. The war in the east is no doubt an important matter for those who are engaged in it, but not for me. Certainly I can't afford to look on at it. I can't afford to be a looker on right here and now, for there is war all around us, and I stand armed in the thick of it. I have dropped my pen and taken up the sword while you and I have sat here at this table."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the first duty of every man is to the woman he loves; that all the labors of his youth are merely preparation; that he endures hardships and sees battles and fights them if the chance comes for no other worthy purpose than to learn how to fight for her. And I haven't done it. I have been looking on and jotting down notes that I call stories. I'm through with it. To be plain with you, Jack, there is one high and holy task before me now, and the Lord, through you, has given me the grace to see it. Good night. Give my respectful thanks to Mr. Graham. You will see me again when I have cut my way out of the heart of this battle."

On the third day following this interview at the time of sunset Kendall knocked at the Camerons' door and was admitted. He was haggard and pale, but his eyes revealed an inexhaustible energy of spirit. He crossed the room quickly to where Edith sat by the western window and kissed her hand with a fine deference.

"What has happened?" she asked, looking up at him. "Something has come of all the mystery of these last few days. Is it a story?"

"Yes," said he; "a love story about the prettiest girl that ever lived and the stupidest man that ever died—and didn't know it till one day he waked up and saw that he was dead and came to life again. The occasion of this miracle was a conversation with an excellent friend who for the dead-alive man's good suggested an expedition to the wilds of Manchuria, where, I am told, there is a war in progress. Instantly the awakened individual perceived that there was fighting nearer home in which he had an intimate concern. In the midst of the battle he saw the prettiest girl aforesaid desperately threatened and surrounded by foes. Now, which battle was his, think you?"

"It didn't take him long to decide, and he began to look to his weapons. In his right hand there was a pen—a good weapon in its way, but too slow for this emergency. So he reached up into the air and seized an idea which had the form and potency of a sharp sword. It had been within his reach and dimly perceived for many months, but he had been too sluggish to grasp it. Armed therewith, he hewed his way to the citadel of a powerful magician who sat by a barrel of bright gold, with which he worked his wonders. 'This sword for a share of that gold!' cried the invader, but the magician uttered a cold 'Ha, ha!'"

"Thrice and four times the man returned to the attack, and each time the



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sword was sharpened upon hard facts and polished with much thought. And at last he forced it into the hand of the great magician and was himself next moment head and shoulders in the barrel of red gold.

"To be plain, Edith, I have done a pretty stroke of business. I have some money down and some work to do and a good, safe contract for a sufficient salary. Dearest, look out into the west. The tint in that sky shines up around

the curve of the world from a little house bowered in roses. It shines into your cheeks. Come; there will be more color where the roses are. Let us go to find them."

"I dare not," she murmured, trembling.

"A gentleman connected with an express company," said he calmly, "will call for your baggage and your mother's tomorrow about this hour."

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Notice is hereby given that the registration books of the city of Astoria, for the primary nominating election to be held in this city on Monday the 13th day of November, 1905, will be opened at the Auditor's office in the city hall, on Monday the 23rd day of October, 1905, and will close for said primary election on the 7th day of November, 1905, at the hour of 4 o'clock p. m., said registration books will be again opened on Thursday the 16th day of November, 1905, for the general election to be held in this city on Wednesday the 13th day of December, 1905, and will close on Saturday, the 9th day of December, 1905, at 4 o'clock p. m. All persons must register in order to be entitled to vote.

Dated, Astoria, Oregon, October, 21st, 1905.

OLOF ANDERSON,
Auditor and Police Judge of the city of Astoria

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